

2021 Congress Statement - Liturgy and the Arts

As interdisciplinary approaches continue to enrich the study of liturgy, our wish is to seize an opportunity opened by our 2021 Congress to begin a new conversation around liturgy and the arts, exploring new approaches that might be fruitful for our times. In its history, our society has already engaged with the topic of the Arts. Since the first volume of *Studia Liturgica* appeared in 1962, the journal has carried a relatively small number of articles on liturgy and the arts. Within that body of material, music and architecture receive most attention, dance appears once, and the visual, plastic and digital arts have not featured at all. More recently, there have been one or two pieces which address the wider relationship between liturgy and the arts. Robin Jensen's work on baptismal spaces (2012) and James Hadley's discussion of the arts in twentieth-century liturgical reform (2015) exemplify modes of exploring convergences.

This absence of any sustained engagement with such a significant area has intrigued the current Council as we have turned the focus on 'liturgy and the arts' as the field of enquiry for our Congress in 2021.

We suggest at the outset that the relationship between liturgy and the arts is lively and even volatile. It entails ancillarity or auxilarity (how do liturgy and the arts support each other and promote each other's best expression); affinity (what concerns, aims and techniques do liturgy and the arts share?); and contestation (what forms of opposition, or mutual critique, create both negative and positive encounters between liturgy and the arts?). Our proposal for opening up a thematic exploration rests initially on four areas of enquiry. Each of them is an invitation to consider the relationship between our two key terms from a particular angle:

THE ART OF LITURGY:

Here, we attend to liturgical action as both inspired and a place of inspiration; as creative, formational and celebratory, yet also holding the potential for transcendence. All of this requires mediation, and Lawrence J. Hoffmann describes the liturgy as 'an art which uses other arts' (*Worship* 94.1, 2020).

THE ARTS IN LITURGY:

The liturgy is immersed in space and time. For Aidan Kavanagh, this demands that 'critique of the sonic, visual, spatial and kinetic arts' be part of liturgical theology (*On Liturgical Theology*, 143). Such critique should be mutually beneficial, opening up the liturgy as an imaginative space.

LITURGY AND THE ARTS:

This aspect probably embodies the elements most immediately associated with our research theme. We wish to affirm the great value of discussing aesthetic merit, style, taste, artistic commissions, and the role of the Churches as patrons of the arts. Two further aspects of the theme invite development. The first of these is the lively juxtaposition of liturgy and the arts as an ongoing phenomenon. The second is their 'tumultuous history', enacted between the extremes of idolatry and iconoclasm.

LITURGY AS PUBLIC ART:

The liturgy has an obligation to be prophetic and to bear testimony, both within the life of its practitioners, and in its encounters with the world we term 'secular'. How participants collectively might become 'a fitting testimony' (1 Timothy 6:13) is one development of this angle of enquiry. How the ancient sense of liturgy as 'work on behalf of the people' might be recovered is another.

To probe these areas and the many questions they generate, we suggest seven research axes:

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL

Liturgical theology, to adopt the words of Andrea Grillo, claims that the human being is an animal symbolicum, ceremoniale, liturgicum. The human body and mind are fitted with a multiplicity of intellectual and sensual capacities. In religious rituals and liturgies as well as in the arts, physical and mental aspects are richly interwoven. In rituals and liturgies, a variety of artistic strands, together with the pertaining religious stories and sermons, can relate to human beings with their mental and physical capacities.

Neurobiological research now confirms that joint artistic activities can facilitate experiences of transcendence, promote health, and foster pro- social behaviour. Liturgical arts, then, can bring forth faith in transcendent realities, in God as creator and saviour and as giver of eternal life. In addition, liturgical arts can stimulate healing processes, strengthen religious communities and promote pro-social behaviour.

Such insights into the benefits of joint artistic activities can be misused, as has sadly happened in the various context of totalitarian regimes. Ritual arts can strengthen destructive powers. However, here lies an additional motive for liturgists to scrutinise the functioning of arts.

Guiding questions:

In which ways can liturgists and artists “cross-pollinate” to promote the common good? How can the dialogue with artists help theologians to better understand the aesthetic dimensions of liturgy?

Can an anthropological approach to liturgical art help to overcome animosities between theologians and liturgical artists? In which way can anthropological research challenge theologians and church leaders to search for renewed approaches to the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of liturgy, overcoming the common conflict between “traditionalists and modernists”?

How can the misuse of the power of artistic and ritual - namely to influence human behaviour in destructive ways - be prevented? -And finally, how can artistic experience and practice itself change theological questioning?

THE CULTURAL / INTERCULTURAL

J-J. von Allmen’s account of culture as the ‘overplus’ of worship properly directed at seeking the Kingdom (Matthew 6.33) was offered with confidence in the 1960s. So also was his conviction that art, called into the service of liturgy, found its own vocation, and demonstrated that ‘the Church eschatologically welcomes the worship of the non-human creation’ (Worship, 1965, pp. 107-109). While sensitivities to other faiths and to societies no longer overwhelmingly Christian impose a certain reserve, we would wish to affirm that liturgy inhabits culture and is always an expression of culture. As Don Saliers has written, ‘Christian worship is always culturally embodied and marked by a distancing from the beginning, because of Jewish bias and a reaction due to the affinity between art and idolatry in the Hellenistic world. But very quickly, the resources of art were placed at the service of the liturgy which itself became a true art. It would be useful in the context of our Congress to focus on different exempla of this complex relationship in different periods and cultural spheres, not so much to trace an itinerary, but rather to become aware of the great variety of modalities of this connection in time and space. Ideally, these different contributions would enable us to map the history of this connection; and perhaps to identify and characterise several paradigms of this relationship, possibly conceived in a modality of denial, of pedagogical support, of cosmic or even mystical connection. The modern issues of the liberty of the artist and the autonomy of the work of art in a liturgical context would be systematically examined.

Guiding questions:

Beyond the inevitable and always useful monographs, how can historical examples foster or nuance the mapping of the relationship between art and liturgy?

What cultural, denominational or cyclical factors influence these gradual shifts? What tensions between different models of connection of art and liturgy does history help to identify in a common cultural and/or denominational sphere?

Can different models coexist for different arts in a common world? What impact could the exchanges between the major religions have had on the relationship between art and liturgy in Christian worship?

THE THEOLOGICAL (Fundamental/ Systematic)

If art has neither an ancillary nor a pedagogical place in the liturgy, how is it to be understood in fundamental theology? The Congress must honour this essential question to which our traditions, to say the least, provide nuanced answers. Several fields will be explored. Here are some: art as a theological locus, artistic experience and liturgical experience, art as gift and therefore grace, the artistic experience as healing, art as initiation into the Mystery and mystagogy, art in its

analogical links with the great fields of Christian theology: art and creation, art and incarnation, art and eschatology, art, sacramentality and transfiguration. It would be good to begin these explorations from the analogical links between theory and the practice of the arts, in particular in the liturgy, and from what the liturgy tells us and gives us to live on from the Mystery.

Guiding questions:

How do we take seriously art, liturgical art in particular, as a theological locus? Under what conditions, especially methodological ones, can one theologise from a body of art, indeed, from artistic experience?

Can the reality and/ or experience of art help us to understand more finely certain great categories of fundamental theology, such as grace, creation, eschatology, sacramentality?

Under what conditions is art a place of initiation into Mystery, indeed, a place of healing? One could explore the conditions for a non-instrumentalisation of art in and through the liturgy.

THE PASTORAL

Liturgy and art "speak" both to and from human experience in multiple ways. Both are able to express something of our human condition in the world. They bring into material form our joys and sorrows, shape and interpret our experiences, and provide occasions and practices for the transformation of our suffering. Liturgy and art also are able to evoke particular feelings. They call forth and give form to that for which we have not had words, even calling our attention to feelings we were unaware of having. They also train us to see, hear, and experience the world in new ways. Yet, despite these goods, their interaction faces several risks--on the one hand, a kind of literalisation of the poetic and, on the other, commodification or commercialisation.

Guiding Questions

What pastoral good is served through the collaboration of liturgy and arts? How do liturgy and the arts work together to interpret and shape human experience? How does the affinity or contestation between liturgy and the arts serve to transform human suffering?

In what ways does the commercialisation, literalisation, or denaturation of art undermine the pastoral potential of the liturgy?

What potential pedagogical and/or mystagogical opportunities become possible through the affinities and disjunctions between liturgy and the arts?

What sensibilities are required or must be developed in order for liturgy and the arts to more fully serve their pastoral potential? Why are such sensibilities required? Does the need for such sensibilities result in a renewed aesthetic elitism?

THE PROPHETIC

The multi-layered aesthetic experience of the liturgy can, with Giorgio Bonaccorso, throw human beings out of our "safe circles" and against the "other" – otherwise they might miss the manifold flavours of the world. Liturgy's prophetic power can lead to metanoia and convert human hearts and minds, so that they will leave their secure strongholds and begin to find love for those of other cultures or religions. In liturgy, the artistic ritual strands can ferment the biblical Word and the prophetic message of sermons. They can interrupt the common patterns of thinking and pronounce truth in powerful and liberating ways. As outlined in Cláudio Carvalhaes' *Liturgical Liberation Theology*, liturgy will then often be understood as provocation. When this happens, liturgy enters into contestation with cultures, powers and principalities.

In a constructive prophetic perspective, liturgical art, as in music, dance, gestures, architecture, visual art, poetry, and book arts, can also serve as expression and as 'midwife' of hope, both in an utopian and an eschatological sense.

Guiding questions:

In which ways can the arts bring forward and fertilise the prophetic powers of liturgy?

Which is the relationship and the interplay between liturgical arts and the prophetic word, as in biblical readings

and the sermon? How can the artistic dimensions of liturgy bring forth human change of ethical attitudes and behaviour?

Which is the role of artistic interruption within the liturgy?

Can the ongoing practice of liturgy and arts strengthen the capacity to resist in the face of evil powers?

Moreover, how can an ongoing and ever-deepening dialogue between artists and theologians challenge religion, culture and society in liberating ways?

Finally, how can liturgy and the arts give birth to new hope, not only as an eschatological hope, but also as hope in this earthly life – for individuals, humanity, and for our plane

THE PUBLIC/POLITICAL

Aidan Kavanagh, in his *On Liturgical Theology*, describes the church as "not only worldly and urbane but also immersed in artistic discourse." He describes the liturgy as a context in which the "world is done rightly" and, therefore, concerned not with itself but with the good of the "polis." As such, he invites us to consider, in each time and place, the ways in which liturgy is, as the root meaning of *leitourgia* suggests, a "public service" and political, even as we acknowledge its potential for misuse, manipulation, or subversion of "the good." In addition to such concerns for public service, we increasingly see unofficial liturgies prompted by and designed to respond to specific human disasters (whether natural or human in origin), through which people across religious traditions and political causes are brought together for the sake of a common good, a "means of grace" that "re-members the world" in all its need before God.

Guiding Questions:

How do liturgy and art combine to serve or subvert the common good?

In what ways, and with what consequences, do the affinities or contestations between liturgy and the arts support or challenge claims of elitism?

What role does the churches' patronage of the arts, both historical and contemporary, contribute to such claims?

Is patronage of the arts a kind of *leitourgia*?

What role do "urban liturgies" (processions, Passion enactments, civic rituals) play in the churches' witness to the world? What potential for human liberation finds embodiment through such liturgies?